OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

The GRUB and the BUTTERFLY

by Mary Heaton Vorse.

THERE is no doubt about it; some of the flowers in the garden of joy wither up and die when a man realizes for the first time that instead of being regarded as a man he is regarded as a husband. This I can make clearer by a little incident.

It occurred as far back as the first dance to which Felicia and I went after our marriage. It was a large dance, and though I am no more light-minded than my neighbors, I confess to a childish joy in a good dance. Indeed, I had often wondered why the husbands I knew, who had blithely footed it in their young days, had now to be drugged and bound ere their wives could carry them off triumphant to a dancing party. Among other reasons why this should be so, I was shortly to learn the principal one.

The dance was an informal one, but fairly large. In the course of a few moments I was presented to a girl in flame-colored clothes. She had large brown eyes and a smooth, childish brow and a childish mouth. She looked, indeed, like a very beautiful little girl whom a fairy godmother had touched with a wand and made to grow up overnight, and dressed up very wonderfully and sent out to a party. But behind this mask of childishness there flickered and gleamed a demon of mischief. Indeed, a most delectable little girl, altogether, was what I thought.

We danced. She danced as she looked she would, and while she danced she looked into my eyes. Having been dead to the world because of my Felicia, I had forgotten girls did this, and it came to me with a shock of pleasant surprise. She tried on me one after another of her charming, innocent artillery of coquetries. As I say, I had forgotten girls acted this way. It was like waking up after a long sleep.

How sincerely glad I was that they did so I showed artlessly. I felt like a mariner returned from a long sea voyage who sees beautiful women afresh, after months on the salt water. We sat out a dance or two in a convenient corner. "How beautiful," I thought, "is the world. We really should go out oftener." The tide of enjoyment rose high within me.

Then, because I was as innocent of the world I found myself in as a new-laid egg, and seeing Felicia walking past:

"I should like to have you meet my wife," says I.

"I should love to meet Mrs. Jeffers," returned my partner, with every cordiality.

I effected the introduction, and we sailed away. But where those innocent coquetries that had so pleased me a moment before? "Gone with the snows of yesteryear," nor could any cajolement of mine bring from her an answering flicker. The little sparkle of awakening interest was replaced by a staid friendliness. I might have been dancing with my sister. It was all very depressing.

I took my partner back to her place and soon had the chagrin of seeing the mischief in her eyes reawaken at the call of a wabble-kneed, chinless youth with lank drab hair. Gloom settled on me. I danced with some married women I knew, and talked with some old ladies. I danced with Felicia—who wasn't interested in me. She did it, I felt, much as she might give orders about the pressing of my clothes—part of one of her wifely duties, and to show the world at large that we were good friends, though married.

In the carriage home:

"What happened to you?" Felicia asked me. "You seemed to be having such fun the first part of the evening, and then, all of a sudden, you turned sulky."

"What happened to me, Felicia, was this," I replied with dignity. "I discovered one of Nature's laws which isn't flattering to my vanity. The career of man is exactly opposite to that of the butterfly. Man starts with wings; then he enters into the cocoon of marriage; presently he eats his way out into the world and expects to fly. He finds that instead of being possessed of iridescent wings, he is nothing but a useful grub. It is no doubt good for the world that this should be so, Felicia, but it is depressing for the grub."

"Piffle!" consoled Felicia. Then she said dreamily: "Did you notice what a heavenly dancer that long-legged man with the red hair was?"

I looked at Felicia. There are things about my wife that I never quite understand. Why should she have expected me to notice the gymnastics of a long-legged youth with red hair? I ignored her remark.

"There are countries, Felicia, where it is the woman who retires into the cocoon and emerges, as I have said, a useful grub. If you lived in one of these, you would have listened with more sympathetic attention."

"I asked him to call," replied Felicia.

It was a series of experiences like this which taught me the difference between a man and a mere husband. We continued to go to dances, and I found myself becoming a frequenter of the smoking room and an attaché of elderly ladies. Felicia, instead of sympathizing with me, complained that I didn't seem to have a good time, and that I was on her mind.

"I perform my useful, if humble, function," I told Felicia. "Let me alone. I will cheerfully dance with all the girls who don't find partners. I will sit in the smoking room, doing harm to no one. I will talk to the old ladies. But I refuse to have my feelings trampled on by misses who find more excitement in dancing with any flat footed, freckle-handed, turkey-necked, unmarried kid than with a decent married man!"

Occasionally a flicker of sunlight diversified my monotonous existence as a husband. Now and then one of the older girls would smile at me impudently, signifying that, husband or no, it was all the same to her. Occasionally a married woman, whose husband no doubt treated her badly, would make me the temporary solace of her disappointed heart.

So I went on with my rôle of encourager of the aged, and partner to the unsuccessful, until one day—or rather one evening—there drifted into my life a little girl as young as spring, with the smile of an indecorous angel, and pale gold as to the hair. It was Felicia who introduced me to her, and in my lack-luster married way I asked her to dance. To my surprise, she lifted her velvety purple eyes to mine and said:

"I should love to."

During our dance she plied the blandishments of youth upon me. When the dance was over, and we stood chatting together, there approached us a young man with no more expression in his face than a new-washed slate. I resigned myself to have the monotonous story repeated. When he asked to see her dance card, and asked for the first vacant dance, the seventh, the unbelievable happened.

"I've just given the seventh to Mr. Jeffers," said she.

"Can I have the tenth?" asked the young man.

"I've given him that, too," replied my partner; "that and the supper dance. That's all I have left."

Beaten, the young man bowed stiffly and turned his disappointed back. I felt sorry for the fine, upstanding young fellow, who was one of the nicest looking boys I had seen in a long time.

She turned her dove's eyes on me again, pleading, "I hope you don't mind!"

Did I mind? Under them, my heart grew young again. The tender green grass of innocent affection sprang up in the arid places. Bird song again was heard in the trees where no song had been for so long. Spring came again. After all, it was nice to be treated by the young as though one were a person of some value in oneself. Here at last was a nice girl, a girl who liked me for myself, who was willing to dance with me and talk with me, and didn't care a bean that she wouldn't be able, because of my being married, to tie me to her chariot wheels.

What happened next rather piqued me. Of course, it was very kind of Felicia, and very high-minded, and not for the world would I have her feel otherwise than she does. Still, to have your wife start into cultivate an attractive young thing the way she might cause your favorite dessert to be made for you, has its elements of humiliation.

"I know I'm not dangerous, Felicia!" my heart cried aloud. "I know—and glory in the fact—that no more well-behaved married man than I could be found in the four kingdoms. But oh, Felicia, why rub it in? It's all very well to be a virtuous husband of one's own will, but to have it taken for granted in this cold-blooded way!"

In a certain way, too, it is highly unbecoming in a woman to let her husband perceive that she's so darn sure of him. I've seen many a woman married to a man beside whom I am a roaring lion, giving him the gratifying impression that she at least considers him a roistering blade, and needing looking after. That's how a man likes to feel. But for your wife to toss you a nice-looking young lady to amuse yourself with, with the same serenity that she'd toss you a new book—well, it did stick in my crop.

"Oh, Felicia," I thought to myself reproachfully, "how much more becoming in you a little flicker of jealousy would have been! Then I could have taken you in my arms, Felicia, and embracing you fondly, said, 'There's no one in the world but you for me, my darling!' Then you, with your head resting upon my shoulder, could have looked up and murmured, 'Yes, I know—but—' I should have understood your little tremor of doubt of yourself, and have soothed you. 'I never will see the girl again,' I could have said, 'if you don't want me to.' And you, all indignation at such a thought, would have besought me to see her all I wished to, which, of course, I should have done—but with how much more gusto under those circumstances, Felicia! How much more nobility and interest would have been lent to life!"

As it was I was sent out into the world marked, as far as Felicia was concerned, with a sign in six-foot letters: "Not dangerous!" Hang it all, it's all very well to be not dangerous; but it's a thing you want to keep to yourself. I'm a modest man. I don't like to wear my virtues on my sleeves. In fact, many a more worthy man than I has been driven to acts he has afterwards regretted by the complacent behavior of his wife.

"Oh, very well, woman!" they say to themselves. "I'm not dangerous, am I? Just watch me!"

Indeed, the only woman whose duty it is to treat her husband as the lamb with mint sauce is the woman who in reality has a roaring lion for a mate, who goes around devouring what he can. For her, Felicia's irritating serenity would be the wise policy. But do you catch women with husbands like this acting so? No! You find them hopping up and down like excited sparrows on their door-steps, and calling after the departing figures of their lords:

"Don't eat anybody, John! Oh, don't eat anybody before you come home!"

The lion goes off, muttering and grumbling things about "darn fools" and "jealousy." And there you are! That's the way with women.

So it happened that I found myself thrown with my little friend of the pale gold hair, whose romantic name was Rosalie. Indeed, I do not think that I am doing Felicia injustice when I say I was thrown at Rosalie. There was something about my wife's manner that led me to suspect that she had been guilty of thoughts like:

"Thank God, he's got something to amuse him at last! Now when we go out I shan't see him 'glommering' at me from doorways."

To test the truth of this theory, I asked an old friend of mine, who is a married woman of some years' standing, why it was that wives were always so worried about their husbands when they were in company. I threw this out as a fisherman throws a fly to a salmon. I might get my answer; I mightn't.

I got it. It was wriggling large at the end of my question mark before it had fairly touched the water.

"Good Heaven!" she said. "It's because a man's a tremendous responsibility. There's hardly a husband living who will go out and have a good time and amuse himself. He's always coming back to his wife and hanging around, until she's afraid that each party's going to be her last. First you go through the awful misery of getting your husband dressed, and next you nurse him through the whole evening; and when you think that most men begin to think of going home the minute they get to a dance, and put on airs about being nice if they do happen to stay——!"

My friend wagged her head. The indictment against the husband was indeed heavy. I didn't say to her, as I might:

And whose fault is it, woman, that these young men who went gayly to parties now shun them like the plague? Whose fault is it that all decent men, who are fond of their wives, are left to languish in doorways and smoking rooms?"

But I said nothing, and merely resolved that the unpleasing thought that Felicia had thrown Rosalie at me as a bribe, and also to get me off her hands, should not dampen my pleasant friendship with Rosalie.

We became, indeed, the best of friends. Our relation became one recognized by the society in the gay little summer place where we were stopping. At dances it was a matter of course that I should dance with Rosalie a number of times, just as if I were any gallus young blade. Was there a motor-ing expedition planned—I had my place near Rosalie. People gave me Rosalie to take in to dinner. All of which I did with my weather eye on Felicia, ready at the first signal to assure her how heart free I was, and of my utter innocence of even incidental disloyalty. But Felicia continued to be as complacent and unruffled as any bowl of cream on the pantry shelf.

During our many tête-à-tês, Rosalie told me of her life, especially her childhood. She confided to me lovely little things that I had never expected to hear again—things that Felicia had never told me. For instance, Rosalie told me that she was very different from other girls; that she had been strange even as a child—so strange that it worried her aunts terribly. Her mother had always said, "Let her alone—she'll turn out all right." Never had Felicia allowed such an appealing and simple-hearted confession to drop from her lips.

Rosalie told me further that she had the very highest ideals; that she thought, between people, absolute trust must be the basis of any affection.

"I wouldn't marry a man," she said, "who could mistrust me, no matter what I did—no matter how appearances were against me, he would have to give me his absolute and unbroken trust. Even if," she said, "he thought he had caught me with the goods on, he would have to trust me!"—for Rosalie had a piquant way of interspersing elevated conversation—she was extremely fond of elevated conversation, as it is right and good that the young should be—with fragments of the slang of the day.

She had never, she said, cared for boys of her own age; she seemed rather gratified that this was so. She gave me to understand that maturity of a rather hoary sort appealed to her. This was not as flattering as she intended it to be, in her innocence; but I capped it off neatly by telling her that she had no idea what an uplifting influence the fresh, sweet friendship of a young girl might be to a worn wayfarer. It was here she gave me to understand that I couldn't conceive what the strong friendship of a hoary-headed elder would mean to her. She needed friends, she said, with a pathetic droop of her lower lip. Indeed, friends would probably be the only thing she would have in life! She gave me to understand that, though young, she had suffered much.

It may sound foolish in the telling, but it was like revisiting Youth for me to listen to Rosalie's artless immaturities. I loved to have her look at me with naïve wonder, saying:

"I don't know how it is that I can talk to you so much more easily than anybody else!"

Indeed, I do not think there was one of the well-worn platitudes of youth that Rosalie did not hand me out with the air of bestowing upon me a new-minted coin of thought—as indeed she was, dear child, as far as she was concerned. For even now, I can think with no bitterness of Rosalie.

It was about this time that our little personal understanding began. It happened this way.

"You'd better," I said to Rosalie, "put these chocolates in an unostentatious spot; your aunt is coming, and she'll catch you with the goods on."

Rosalie, I may explain, has an inordinate fondness for chocolates, which her aunt tries to curb. At this speech, Felicia frowned at me.

"I don't think," she told me austerely, "it's dignified in you to teach Rosalie slang like that."

Rosalie also turned a cold eye upon me.

"No," she emphatically agreed with Felicia; "I think it's a horrid slang phrase."

It was too good a joke to keep, and I would undoubtedly have told Felicia had not she gone to greet Rosalie's aunt, who now arrived, and Rosalie seized this opportunity to say to me:

"Oh, I was so frightened when you said that! You must never tell Felicia—never—that you got 'caught with the goods on' from me!" Dear child, she supposed she had taught it to me!

As I say, the joke was too good to keep, so I let it out that Felicia herself could go Rosalie three better in the picturesque use of her mother tongue, and had only been throwing a bluff; at which Rosalie, recalling the solemn and elevated talk of only a moment before, giggled and giggled again, until Felicia asked:

"What are you two giggling about?"

"We'll never tell!" Rosalie giggled. "We've got a secret!"

After that our friendship took on a more intimate tone. I used slang frequently in Felicia's presence, to be reproved with severity by both Rosalie and Felicia. It was one of the simple delights of my simple heart to hear Rosalie exclaim affectedly:

"Oh, Mr. Jeffers, I wish you wouldn't use slang—I shall be using it next, if I hear you!"

So you see what simple-hearted pleasures mine were in those days, and how little it took to please me—nothing but the feeling that I was liked for myself alone; nothing but the companionship of people on a human basis—nothing, in short, but not having it rubbed in by every young person I met that I was a married man.

So I went on permitting Rosalie to enliven for me the boredom of things, and feeling, by the way, that I was doing her no end of good. Little by little I began to talk to her on serious subjects, and the thought that I might form her young mind occurred to me. I even mentioned the matter to Felicia, a little sheepishly. At which Felicia asked me:

"Has she one, do you suppose, to form?"

Which, I confess, was a question I couldn't very well answer.

"Here she is now!" Felicia added, and went forward to meet our little friend and left me to decide the question.

I decided she must have. It was more flattering for me that she should. Besides, her obvious liking for me was a most encouraging symptom. Under the effervescence and the conventional speech of youth, a mind might be somewhere lurking.

They came in together, Felicia and Rosalie. Rosalie was blushing, with every evidence of confusion, and yet of pride.

"You tell him!" she implored Felicia.

"No, you tell him," said Felicia.

"You tell him!" Rosalie echoed, like a little parrot. "He'll be so pleased!"

"Oh, very well," said Felicia. "He will." With the most unconscious air in the world, "Rosalie's engaged," was the amazing piece of information she gave to me.

It took me all in a heap, knocked me in the solar plexus.

"Rosalie's what?" I echoed stupidly.

"Engaged," dimpled Rosalie. "Isn't it nice!"

"Very," I agreed. By this time I had got myself together again, although in my own mind I was asking "When?" and "How on earth?" and "Where?" I didn't see where she had made the time to accomplish this. I realized at the same time what an industrious girl Rosalie was.

"Of course," I went on, with something of what I trusted was light sarcasm, "it's quite an incident, I know, to a girl—it's being engaged that counts—that's the grand affair; but her friends like to know the name of the man—not that it matters very much, of course. He's naturally an incident in the whole affair."

Rosalie's mouth formed itself into a round red "O."

"Why," she exclaimed, "I thought you'd guess who it would be!"

She spoke with the voice of a girl who doesn't know that there is more than just one man in the world and who, from the hour of her birth, has known but one, and who has been potentially betrothed to him always.

"It's Henry Standish, of course," she announced.

This, I may explain, was the name of the young man with the expression of a white-washed cellar door whose dances Rosalie had given me the night of our meeting.

"I've been proving him," she went on. "And, oh!" she clasped her hands here with a little girlish gesture that seemed less fascinating to me than it had the day before—"you don't know how beautifully he's acted—beautifully! I thought at first I'd tell you about it, so that you could help me out—but Felicia said you'd act more natural if you didn't know anything about it. You see," she went on, her face falling into a sad little expression, "I've seen so much grief and misery come into the world from people suspecting each other that, as I told you, I couldn't marry any man who didn't give me implicit trust, no matter what I did, no matter how bad it was. When I first began to"—she hesitated, to choose her words—"to—to be nice to you," she faltered, "I thought he was going to be like all the rest of the men; but after that he was just as sweet and patient! Instead of glommering, he took any dances or any little thing I did for him, as gratefully, and never made any hateful references when he came to call. There aren't many men"—I never had noticed how Rosalie did run on when she got wound up!—"there aren't many men who would see the girl they care for going around with a married man, and not be cross! And then I asked Felicia if I might, and she said she didn't care——"

Here, I am glad to say, is where I acted nobly—or rather, I acted so that I didn't need to blush for myself. Advancing to Rosalie, I took both her hands in mine, and wished her joy, told her what a happy man the young man was, and touched lightly on my joy in having been able to play my own small part in the drama of her life. A new tone—a paternal tone—was present in my accent.

But Rosalie, the ingrate, hadn't even time to listen to my kindly and well-chosen speeches. She was like a little captive bird, fluttering to be gone, to fly on rapid wings to the spot where the young man with the hard-boiled-egg countenance was doubtless awaiting her.

On her departure I picked up a book, said something pleasant to Felicia to include her in the silence, and settled to read, although the words that appeared on the page before me made no impression on my mind.

I had been put in my place once for all! My one little friend had used the fact that I was a married man to further her own ends. It was the hand of Rosalie that dealt me the final blow—or, to use a more fitting simile, who had slammed the door of the cage upon me forever.

Yes, Rosalie had used me scandalously All her innocent wiles, that I thought were for me, had been so many put-up jobs done for the benefit of a long-legged oaf. I shuddered to think of the depths of self-control that it must have taken to keep her by my side when every bit of her cried aloud for the presence of her blank-faced swain—what perseverance she had shown!—what continuity of purpose—for Rosalie had done her work with a thoroughness that was worthy of a better cause than making a poor young man uncomfortable for no reason, and denying herself at the same time her heart's desire.

Then, as I looked over these unvarnished facts, there swept over me a great pity for Henry Standish. Indeed, I found myself voicing my thoughts to Felicia with:

"There's a young woman who's going to rule her house with an iron hand!"

Felicia's reply to this was:

"I couldn't have stood her around much longer! Oh, Bobby, I'd forgotten that girls burble the way they do!"

To listen to the woman, one would have thought that she had been leading a long life of self-sacrifice. Silence again fell between us. I hope I gave the impression of being immersed in my book. Light dawned on me.

"Felicia!" I said sternly, "you told him!—I'll bet you anything you choose you told him!"

To this Felicia answered virtuously:

"I'm not one of those criminals who sit back and watch fools slap their own happiness in the face!"

She walked across the room, and turning suddenly, faced me:

"Think of her having the impudence of asking me if I minded—I minded—her talking much with you!"

She wagged her head as she gazed into the nameless depths of Rosalie's lack of tact. Then a puzzled look came into her face, and I knew she was wondering how on earth I had stood so much of what she called Rosalie's "burbling"; and I realized the gulf there was yawning between us, a gulf put there by Felicia's fatal lack of imagination. I longed to cry:

"Oh, Felicia, can't you realize that as a clever woman who finds herself a wallflower will dance gratefully with a sixteen-year-old boy——"

I stopped. There was more in it than that. There came to me a vision of Rosalie, a little gay, glancing, laughing vision. The world of parties suddenly seemed to be blank desolate. I glanced covertly at Felicia over the edge of my book. Good Heavens! Did the woman suppose that one wanted intellectual conversation from girls like Rosalie; wasn't warm youth, and pretty looks, and gayety enough?

And now, it was all over. I had been played scandalously. No more would Rosalie chirrup at my side. Then a vision of how she must have bored Felicia came to me. I smiled cheerfully to myself; for, after all, a good deal of the joke was on Felicia.

HERE AT LAST WAS A NICE GIRL WHO LIKED ME FOR MYSELF.